

Original Paper

Historiographical Critique and Paradigm Shift: Reflections and New Trends in Pakistani History since 1971

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Abstract

East Pakistan became independent in 1971, and this event can be seen as a turning point for Pakistani nationalist historiography because it changed how historians view the national narrative and forced them to reconsider previous assumptions about state formation in the context of religious identity. Bangladesh was born at that time. It brought territorial division and population loss. Also, it challenged core assumptions of the “two-nation theory” and the “ideology of Pakistan” in a way that raised serious questions about whether Muslims constituted a unified nation when East and West Pakistan shared the same religious faith but still ended up in bloody separation. This historical trauma compelled Pakistan’s intellectual community to reexamine official historiographical paradigm. The paradigm had solidified since 1947 under specific political conditions, and now it faced serious challenges from intellectuals who wanted to develop new approaches characterized by critical reflection and new methodological tools that could better explain the actual historical process. It is worth noting that Pakistani historiography underwent a paradigm shift after 1971, and we can see this in K.K. Aziz’s empirical critique and Ayesha Jallal’s postmodern deconstruction. Also, Mubarak Ali made progressive historical explorations. At the same time, international historiographical trends were introduced. These include the Annales School and postmodernism. Subaltern studies also came. They provided new theoretical resources and they can be used as methodological tools for the further development of Pakistani historiography.

Keywords

Positivism, Postmodern Deconstruction, Progressive Historiography, Annales School, Fundamental Research

1. K.K. Aziz's Empirical Critique

1.1 *The Murder of History in Pakistan (1993): A Methodological Revolution in Textbook Critique*

K.K. Aziz can be seen as an important figure in the critical historiography in Pakistan. His book **The Murder of Pakistani History: A Critique of Pakistani History Textbooks** made a change in method of Pakistani historiography. He is a strict Rankean historian. He made careful examination of about 66 textbooks that were used in Pakistani schools at all levels from late 1980s to early 1990s and he found many serious factual errors and also ideological biases in these materials. The starting point of his research was very interesting. When he published his findings in daily **Frontier Post** as a series, the editorial office received many letters from readers. They asked "What is the truth of history?" Most of these readers were educated people living in major cities and they read English newspapers. So Aziz realized there was deeper problem. It is worth noting that these people who wanted to know truth of history were raised on these same textbooks.

Aziz examines the textbooks from first grade to fourteenth grade. This range can cover until the second year of college, and the subjects include social studies, Pakistani studies, and also history. He found that the textbooks can contain factual errors, and the founding date of All-India Congress Party is wrong and the founder and nature are misrepresented, and several textbooks claim that Lord Hume created Congress Party with the aim of organizing Hindus. It is worth noting that the Lahore Resolution date is listed as March 23, 1940 but it should be March 24. In the textbooks, the call for independent states is changed to an independent state. Regarding the glorification of figures, first-grade textbooks tell five-year-old children that Jinnah created Pakistan and Liaquat Ali Khan is portrayed as a national hero second only to Jinnah, but Aziz reveals through extensive oral history sources that there was a deep rift between Jinnah and Liaquat. The 1971 partition is distorted in the textbooks. They attribute East Pakistan's independence to Indian conspiracies and collusion between internal and external enemies, and there is no mention of political oppression in West Pakistan, military atrocities, the genuine demands of Bengali people, and other related historical facts. Aziz points out that these textbooks are not just vehicles of erroneous knowledge. They are tools of ideological indoctrination. In fact, the Pakistani government has achieved what even its British masters never attempted.

1.2 *Fact-Checking and the Academic Appeal of Depoliticization*

Aziz's critical approach can be seen as positivist. He tries to check the facts against the ideologized history stories that exist in official accounts, and he wants to bring back the academic dignity to history as a discipline that should be respected by all scholars in the field. He insists that historical writing should be based on verifiable historical sources, and it should not serve the political needs of those in power. In preface, Aziz writes a famous quote about textbooks. This statement reveals an intellectual paradox we should examine in the context of Pakistani education. When generation after generation of Pakistanis has been fed 'historical opium' by the education system, it is hard for the intellectual elite and ordinary citizens to view themselves, their neighbors, and also the world around them in a correct way. Aziz's empirical critique had a certain academic impact at the time, but it also exposed its own limitations we

need to consider. He placed too much emphasis on objective neutrality of ‘facts’ as the only standard, and he failed to examine deep-seated power mechanisms through which historical narratives are constructed by those who control the writing process in academic and political fields. As Ayesha Jallal pointed out, ‘Pakistani history textbooks are among the best available resources for exploring the connection between power and bias in the creative imagination of the nation’s past’. In fact, this judgment can transcend mere fact-checking and go further. It points to a power analysis of historical writing itself that can help us understand the construction process. It is worth noting that Aziz’s research got no public or policy-level response after it was published in the media, which is unexpected for such a work that challenges the mainstream narrative about national history. This reveals society’s deep indifference toward historical truth and it foreshadows the difficult circumstances facing critical historical scholarship in Pakistan, which can make it hard for future researchers to publish similar works.

2. Ayesha Jalal’s Postmodern Deconstruction

2.1 “The Sole Spokesman”: Deconstructing the Jinnah Myth and Re-examining the Two-Nation Theory

While Aziz’s critique remains within the methodological framework of positivism, Ayesha Jallal represents the postmodern turn in Pakistani historiography. Jallal is one of the most influential scholars in contemporary South Asian historiography; her debut work, “The Sole Spokesperson: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the Demand for Pakistan”, fundamentally transformed the academic understanding of the “high politics” of partition. In the book, Jallal puts forward a subversive central argument: Jinnah never truly sought an independent Muslim state; he merely used the threat of secession as a political tool and bargaining chip to secure greater rights for Muslims within a unified India. Jalal argues that “the partition of 1947 was not part of a solution to the problems of the Muslim minority on the subcontinent”—in other words, the creation of Pakistan was not Jinnah’s political goal, but rather the unintended consequence of the failure of his negotiating strategy. This argument poses a fundamental challenge to Pakistan’s official historiography. In the official narrative, Jinnah is portrayed as a great leader who steadfastly pursued an independent Muslim state from the very beginning, and the creation of Pakistan is presented as a historical inevitability predestined from the moment Muslims first set foot on the subcontinent. Through a meticulous analysis of the political strategies within the Muslim League, Jalal exposes the historical fiction of this linear narrative. She points out that Jinnah continued to seek a compromise with the Indian National Congress even after the adoption of the Lahore Resolution in 1940; it was only after the complete breakdown of the Cabinet Mission negotiations in 1946 that partition became an irreversible political reality. Jalal’s research methodology reflects a shift from “top-down politics” to a more nuanced political analysis. By drawing on Pakistani archival sources to reinterpret the Muslim League’s strategies, she has opened up entirely new avenues for research on the history of partition.

2.2 “Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining”

In 1995, Jalal published an essay called “Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining, This shifts the focus from pre-Partition “high politics” to how the official history is constructed after Partition. The

article examines how Pakistan's national ideology constructs the national identity through historical narratives controlled by the state. Jallal looks at the difference between "the past as invention" and "the past as inspiration." He emphasizes that when collective imagination is used to suppress internal dissent and also threatens to subjugate others, it can become national prejudice. Jalal traces the intellectual history of the "two-nation theory," starting from Sayyid Ahmad Khan, then Muhammad Iqbal's poetic vision, and finally Rahmat Ali's "Pakistan" proposal at Cambridge.

However, we should note that her critique about the confusion in official textbooks regarding issue of 'origins' is sharp. Different textbooks can provide different starting dates. Some trace Pakistan's origin to the birth of Islam on Arabian Peninsula. Some mention Muhammad bin Qasim's conquest of Sindh in 712 AD, and some refer to Sayyid Ahmad Khan's 'Two Nations' theory. M.D. Zafar's textbook describes every expansion of Muslim regime in South Asia as the birth of 'Pakistan'. It says that 'During the Kalji Dynasty, Pakistan expanded further south.' Jalal points out that this confusion is not accidental and it reflects the tension between the non-territorial concept of 'Muslim nation' and the geopolitical reality of Pakistan. With its artificial borders and the urgent pursuit of official Islamic identity, Pakistan can provide a good case to examine the relationship between power and obsession in the imagination of national identity.

3. Mubarak Ali and Progressive Historiography

3.1 The Introduction of Marxist Historical Methods

Dr. Mubarak Ali is a well-known historian in Pakistan. He is also a social activist with progressive views. After 1971, he introduced Marxist historical methods to Pakistan and this helped create a new direction in Pakistani historiography that can challenge traditional approaches. Ali earned his master's degree in history from Sindh University in 1963. Then he received a Ph.D. in history of Mughal India from Ruhr University in Germany in 1976 where he studied complex social structures of that period. He served as chair of Department of History at Sindh University. Also he was dean of Goethe-Institut in Lahore. At the same time, he worked as editor-in-chief of quarterly journal "Tarikh" (History). After Pakistan's independence, many books and articles about "Pakistani ideology" were written and these works were expected to support military rulers and authoritarian regimes. Dr. Ali tried to correct this bias and he introduced new methods in historical writing and it is worth noting that he focused on history of ordinary people rather than political history of elites so that the research can be more balanced.

In book *The Light of History*, Ali examines different historical philosophies. These include materialism, Marxism, and the view that history follows divine will. Also, he points out problems in the catastrophe in Pakistan's historical narrative. It is worth noting that truth about past events has been hidden from the people. In *Feudalism*, he gives analysis of nature of European feudalism and its Indian variants, and we look at how colonial institutions such as the jagdal system, the bureaucracy, and military served colonial hegemony and can influence political structures in postcolonial Pakistan. He said that although feudalism dominates our politics, culture, and society, we still live in the Middle Ages. In *The Shadow of History*,

Ali points out problems in how authoritarian regimes manipulate the discipline of history. In fact, the discipline of history has been used to defend legitimacy of regimes and to mislead the people, and in countries where authoritarians succeed one another quickly, this discipline faces big challenges. While in power, these dictators asked for rewriting of history to align with their policies. After their deaths or overthrow, new regimes can alter entire historical narrative.

3.2 From 'Elite History' to 'People's History': Subaltern Studies, Gender History, and Material Culture

Ali made new contributions to historiography and he introduced Marxist methods which can provide a new analytical framework for understanding historical development, and also he expanded the research scope in a fundamental way that includes more aspects of social life. He believed Pakistani historiography was obsessed with individual figures and the theory of two nations. Also it focused too much on religious sentiment. It is worth noting that this framework should be changed and we can write history with a new perspective. Ali supported oral history. He argued that historical writing should go beyond traditional political history and spiritual history, so that ordinary people can have a voice in the historical records and their daily life can be preserved. In "History and Women", he introduced a gender perspective into Pakistani historiography. In fact, this is a new effort because the traditional Pakistani historiography centered on male elites for a long time. He examined the status of women in the various societies. Also he studied how historiography documented their roles and overlooked them.

Ali also works in field of material culture history. For example, in "History: Food and Dining Etiquette", he shows how dietary habits reflect changes in the society and mentality. In **New Trends in Historical Research**, he traces the long journey of Bangladeshi national identity formation and examines how nationalist claims can change over time when the nature of conflict and specific context are different, which gives us a way to understand historical events. This can help us understand the 1971 secession of East Pakistan. In fact, Ali's scholarly practice marks a transition in Pakistani historiography from "elite historiography" to "people's historiography", and focus of research has shifted from high-level politics and prominent figures to ordinary people and everyday experiences, while constitutional negotiations are replaced by studies of marginalized groups. At the same time, methodology has expanded from single-source archival research. It now includes oral history and material culture analysis and interdisciplinary synthesis is also used so that historians can combine different approaches and multiple sources when they study the past instead of relying only on official documents.

4. International Historiographical Trends and Pakistani Historiography

4.1 The Introduction of the Annales School, Postmodernism, and Subaltern Studies

We can see that Pakistani historiography after 1971 changed a lot. This transformation was not isolated event and can be linked to international trends. In fact, major movements in second half of 20th century, such as Annales School and postmodernism, provided theoretical tools and historians can use these tools to break away from the traditional nationalist narratives. Also, subaltern studies should be considered here. It is worth noting that Annales School provided most systematic methodological resources. In his

article “The Annales School and Pakistani Historiography,” Faraz Anjum points out that Pakistani historical writing “paid almost no attention to the broader epistemological and conceptual debates raging internationally,” and that “Pakistani historiography has, to a large extent, remained isolated and linear—virtually unaffected by contemporary intellectual movements, whether foreign or domestic.”

Annales School provides some tools that can help us examine Pakistan’s official historiography. First, the concept of interdisciplinarity and general history can challenge narrow perspective of Pakistani historiography, which has focused too much on political events and elite figures. It is worth noting that Braudel defined total history as historiography whose scope should include all human sciences. He argued that history should focus on diverse dimensions such as economy, society, culture and mentalities. Second, we can use history of mentalities to study Muslim identity and this concept can help us understand how the “theory of two nations” was accepted in specific emotional structures and cultural contexts. Third, the theory of *longue durée* can challenge short-term narrative of official historiography. In fact, official historiography treats 1947 as a watershed. Braudel divided historical time into three layers where the first layer is deep structures of geographical environments and cultural systems and this is the *longue durée*, the second layer includes economic and social trends, and the third layer is political and diplomatic events. He argued that history of events is superficial disturbances and it is foam carried on back of powerful historical tides. Also, grassroots research opens a bottom-up research path for Pakistani historiography and we can shift focus to historical experiences of marginalized groups. These include women, Dalits, religious minorities and local communities.

4.2 The Predicament of ‘Epistemic Closure’ in Pakistani Historiography and Its Breakthrough

Pakistani historiography faces a deep problem. It is worth noting that this field has long been trapped in “epistemological closedness.” This closedness is not just academic stagnation. In fact, it should be seen as a structural feature in official nationalist historiographical paradigm: once the “Two Nations Theory” and “Pakistani ideology” are established as unquestionable premises, any historical inquiry that deviates from this framework can face risk of political pressure and academic marginalization. Rehana Kausar and Irfan Ahmed Shaikh (2025) pointed out that Pakistani historiography is at an impasse. Also, it is mired in political interference and selective memory, and barriers to access exist. This results in national narrative that can obscure other perspectives. It can produce biased historical accounts.

After 1971, historical criticism movement can offer important resources to challenge this closed system. Aziz found factual errors in the official historiography. This work can serve as a foundation for later critical research. Jalal’s postmodern deconstruction examined how official narratives are constructed and how power mechanisms work in this context, and also Ali introduced different methods such as Marxism and gender studies, and he also used material culture history to enrich the analytical framework. In 2023, Adan Tariq noted that Pakistani historical research is looking for a new paradigm. This exploration is normative and needs participation from qualified professionals who can understand both traditional and modern methods, and the discipline tries to keep a dual epistemological discourse that can balance new methods and traditional approaches in the current academic environment. On one hand, it can advance by

using new methods. On another hand, it should preserve its traditional discourse. It is worth noting that this duality shows the epistemological closure of the Pakistani historiography is not monolithic. In fact, it can exhibit open potential in continuous struggle for knowledge.

But we can see that breaking this closed mindset can meet strong resistance. In 1981, General Zia-ul-Haq announced all graduate students must take course in Pakistani Studies, and the University Grants Commission issued directives requiring textbooks to instill pride in the nation's past and enthusiasm for the present, also they should create an unshakable belief in Pakistan's stability and longevity. It is worth noting that Pervez Hoodbhoy pointed out Muslim League members first used the term Pakistani ideology as late as 1962, and Jinnah himself never used this expression. Regarding the critical period from 1947 to 1977, we can find that all Pakistani Studies textbooks maintained complete silence. Ayub Khan's 1958 military coup was downplayed as rescuing the nation from chaos, and the separation of Bangladesh was attributed to the fact that elections were held, which implies democracy itself can pose threat to Pakistan.

5. Conclusion

Pakistani historiography after 1971 has changed a lot in its nature. It moved from the official nationalist narrative toward critical academic inquiry and we can see several reasons for this change. Aziz gave empirical critique and Jalal used postmodern deconstruction. Also, progressive explorations were done by Ali. At the same time, international trends like Annales School came in. These together are the key factors. But Professor Sharif Mujahid noted that if we do not put the perspectives of new historiography, together with its trends and methodologies, into syllabi and course requirements and also research agendas, then the future of Pakistani historiography as a discipline can be bleak. It is worth noting that the future depends on whether it can inherit the international historical legacy and confront epistemological insularity. In this way, a broader academic space can be opened for understanding the past, the present and also the future of this complex nation.

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Notes

Note 1. The Lahore Resolution (1940) asked for 'independent states' in Muslim-majority regions. But we can see that official Pakistani textbooks changed the plural to singular 'state' and this can support narrative of unified Pakistan.

It is worth noting that we can see the term 'Pakistan Ideology' can be traced to 1962 when members of Jamaat-e-Islami introduced it and this term was never used by Muhammad Ali Jinnah who was the founder of Pakistan. But official historiography says it is the foundation of nation creation.